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AUTHOR	Rosenfeld, Stuart A.
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ABSTRACT

During the second half of the 20th century, two-year colleges in the rural South were transformed from "junior" appendages of other institutions to community colleges that responded to the needs of local workers and businesses. This paper examines how the South's rural community colleges contribute to economic development today and what challenges they face in the near future. Economic development is now accepted as a core mission of community colleges, encompassing such functions as upgrading workplace skills, providing contract courses for industry, and focusing on technology and business development. Certain key features of rural community colleges link them to rural development. Community colleges are more demand driven, more affordable, and more accessible than other institutions of higher education; provide a local repository of knowledge and skills; are freer to adopt explicit economic development goals and tailor programs to regional labor markets; and are egalitarian and open to the entire community. Conditions and trends most likely to influence rural community colleges in the next decade include the increasing impact of information technologies, competition with private-sector education providers, collectivism, globalization, rising academic goals, and changing occupational mix. Recommendations are offered in the areas of articulation with 4-year programs, lifelong learning, learning communities, shift from competencies to problem-solving skills, alliances and collaboration, global outlook, and targeted programs. (Contains 23 references.) (SV)

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THE RURAL SOUTH:

Preparing for the Challenges of the Millennium

Sponsored by the Southern Rural Development Center, the Farm Foundation, the TVA Rural Studies Program at the University of Kentucky, the USDA Economic Research Service, and the 29 Southern land-grant institutions.

The South's rural community colleges in the new millennium

Stuart A. Rosenfeld,
Regional Technology Strategies, Inc.

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If a president of a typical rural two-year college 50 years ago were magically transported to that same school on a morning in the year 2000, he—and it would almost certainly have been a male in 1950—would be hard pressed to recognize his institution. Apart from the obvious differences attributable to renovation, fashion, and technology that occur in virtually any educational institution over that many years, the colleges' missions, functions, and customers—even the name—have changed. In 1950, the college looked very much like an appendage of a university and, in fact, was called a junior college. The hallways were teeming with students—mainly middle class, young, and enrolled in liberal arts programs.

But on a typical morning in 2000, most rooms look deserted because classes for the majority of the students [a], mostly working adults and many already holding post-secondary degrees, are scheduled in the late afternoon, evenings, or weekends. Learning spaces look more like places of work because many of the programs are technical or vocational, and they also are used by companies for training. Large numbers of part-time faculty probably are away at their day jobs. And, the school is called a "community" or "technical," not "junior," college. What brought about the transformation of the South's two-year colleges over the second half of the 20th century, and what further alterations are in store for them over the next 50 years?

It's the economy. The change in the rural South's two-year colleges occurred much less because of advances in pedagogy than shifts in patterns of employment and the nature of work. Two-year colleges have had a major hand in the region's transition from an agricultural economy in the first half of the century to an industrial economy in the second half. The pattern of colleges responding to their economies (i.e., demand for a low-and semiskilled workforce by branch plants

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migrating to the rural South) began in the Carolinas in the 1960s and was quickly emulated by almost every other Southern state by the end of the 1970s. Community colleges added vocational programs to their academic programs, but initially at skill levels that competed with programs offered in high schools' area vocational centers. Over the past quarter century, they began bolstering and upgrading their technical offerings, adding associate of applied science (AAS) degree programs that produce the more highly-skilled workers needed by high performance companies. More recently, colleges have switched from a reactive mode that responded to labor force needs to a proactive mode intended to motivate and help local companies transition to high performance, globally competitive firms. In addition, the region's colleges indisputably have been an important pathway to higher education and better jobs for a Southern rural population that, for most of this century, has been at the bottom of national rankings in educational attainment and achievement.

> "More recently, college have switched from a reactive mode that responded to labor force needs, to a proactive mode intended to motivate and help local companies transition to high performance, globally competitive firms."

How do the South's rural community colleges contribute to economic development today, and what will they have to do differently as we move into the next millennium? What are the next set of challenges and opportunities, and how are community colleges likely to respond?

Transforming Missions

Economic development is now accepted as a core mission of community colleges (even though some still believe that vocationalism threatens the historical democratic purpose of the institutions) [4]. But the form economic development takes and the opportunities it creates for students are changing quite dramatically. Just a decade ago, a national commission established to study the American workforce found that only 5 percent of U.S. businesses were high performance. The Internet was still a university research tool, e-commerce was unknown, and the name Amazon associated with a river. From the '70s through the '80s, the fastest growing rural counties in the South had the lowest levels of education and the slowest growing counties, the highest. But over the last decade, the nature of the organization and uses of production and service technology both have expanded responsibilities of the workforce and enabled rural small and mid-sized businesses to compete. The shifts are perhaps best demonstrated by David McGranahan's analysis, showing that the fastest growing rural counties now have the most educated populations and the slowest growing counties, the least educated [20].

Community colleges can take a significant share of the credit in counties that have remained competitive. In the mid-'80s, when the nation's Extension system for manufacturers was still a vision in the minds of a few members of the U.S. Congress, many Southern rural community colleges—often supported by the Appalachian Regional Commission and Tennessee Valley Authority—were doing precisely what the Manufacturing Extension Partnership was federally authorized to do in 1988 [22]. Gadsden State Community College, in cooperation with the city and University of Alabama, formed the Bevill Center for Advanced Manufacturing; Haywood Community College in western North Carolina established the Regional Technology Center at Waynesville;

Hagerstown Junior (now Community) College in Maryland formed an Advanced Technology Center; and Itawamba Community College in Mississippi established the Advanced Furniture Technology Center [17]. Each provided high quality courses for degree students, contract courses for industry, and a place to observe and experiment with new technologies. Many colleges also focused their expertise on dominant industry clusters [19]. Indeed, these fledgling efforts influenced policy.

In 1995, 90 of 100 colleges surveyed referenced economic development or modernization services in their mission statement [18]. A Ford Foundation study in 1995 identified eight community college functions that directly supported economic development: gateway to workplace, skills upgrading, customized/certified trainer, industry hub, outreach service, teaching factory, incubator, and broker/facilitator [18].

Distinguishing Features of Colleges

Certain distinguishing features of rural community colleges and their environment today link them—perhaps even inextricably it—to rural development. First, community colleges are more demand driven than other institutions and, therefore, increasingly entities of choice among rural employers. In a competitive economic environment where higher skills increasingly outweigh lower costs, it is the community college that prepares the growing mid-skilled labor force. Urban community colleges also offer an increasing array of programs and services but are not as vital simply because there are more alternatives available in large cities.

The Issues

How do the South's rural community colleges contribute to economic development today and what will they have to do differently as we move into the next millennium? What are the next set of challenges and opportunities, and how are community colleges likely to respond?

Key Features of Rural Community Colleges

- More demand driven than other institutions and increasingly the institutions of choice among rural employers.
- More comfortable, affordable, and accessible than other institutions of higher education.
- Provides a local repository of knowledge and know-how.
- Freer to adopt explicit economic development goals, add new programs, and customize them to regional labor markets.
- Egalitarian and open to the entire community.

Trends

Information technologies—triggering a fundamental change in the way work is organized.

Competition—emergence of a growing private sector educational establishment.

Collectivism—forcing innovation to become a collective process.

Globalization—mandating that community colleges think and act globally because customers are global.

Rising academic goals—difficult to attract young people into associate of science degree programs.

New occupational mix—can no longer ignore the rise of the high-tech, value-added service sector, especially in the information technology area.

Responses

- Maintain enrollment and meet rising educational expectations for credit and degrees by better articulating its technical associate of science degree program with four-year programs.
- Provide lifelong learning opportunities.
- Use information technology efficiently to provide information most needed by students.
- Produce workers who understand systems and enterprises by using a "systems" approach and conceptual understanding.
- Enter into alliances, not only with employers but also with other institutions, vendors, associations, and community organizations.
- Prepare students with an understanding of cultures, economic systems, and business environments in other parts of the world.
- Develop niches and special expertise in response to competition from private and web-based providers.

Second, because they are local, lower cost, and more "hands-on," community colleges are more comfortable, affordable, and accessible than other institutions of higher education. The community college's first responsibility is to the community, and programs and services are aimed at local and commuting students and nearby firms. Resources are targeted to the region, and programs are practical and focus on real and local problems.

Third, the institution provides a local repository of knowledge and "know-how" about employment opportunities and services, new technologies and best practices, social services, and so on. It also sponsors cultural events like music, theatre, and fairs. It helps connect the community to the outside world through conferences, exchange students, and lifelong learning opportunities.

Fourth, community colleges, in part because they have never had a secure and essential position in American education, are less constrained by long-standing traditions and institutional memories and are freer to adopt explicit economic development goals, add new programs, and customize them to regional labor markets. This is the "good news" to partially offset the "bad news" that community colleges lack the base of support and recognition within the educational system to effectively compete for funding with high schools and universities.

Finally, the community college is egalitarian and open to the entire community. Since the 1970s, community colleges have admitted any student with a high school diploma or equivalent. Thus, many students are first in their family to enroll in college, represent ethnic and racial minorities, are the children of immigrants, or are students seeking a second chance. A large and growing number are over 40 [b]. Because of this policy, more than half the student body begins without the qualifications for post-secondary degree programs, and most rural community colleges invest significant resources in basic education so that these students can learn or re-learn the fundamentals required. At the same time, community colleges also are enrolling more and more people with college degrees who want new, more marketable skills.

Crossing the Bridge into the Millennium

With the close of the last decade of the twentieth century now behind us, many of the conditions and trends most likely to influence the rural community college in the new decade are already in place.

Information technologies

The impact of information technologies (IT) is remarkable, with the Internet becoming pervasive (at least among middle and upper classes). This is not simply a shift in industrial mix. It has triggered a fundamental change in the way work is organized. For example, according to Peter Drucker "knowledge workers, in effect, cannot be supervised" [16] It has generated a demand for IT specialists that now far exceeds supply [15], and it creates needs for non-core IT specialists able to use IT. Small and large companies alike are shifting to e-commerce and e-business. In addition, it changes how people learn by providing access to ideas, information, and knowledge, particularly important in rural places. It is no accident that Iceland and Finland are the most "wired" countries (Internet users per person) in the world [3]. The challenge will be to stem the class-related disparities associated with IT-related access and skills [14].

Competition

Community colleges increasingly find themselves in competition with a growing private sector educational establishment [23]. The competition includes for-profit and proprietary schools like the University of Phoenix and DeVry, corporate "universities" like Motorola, Sun, and Ford (currently numbering about 1,600), and even faster growing Internet-based education and training programs from both public and private schools. Despite the growth, a few quality control mechanisms or ways for consumers to evaluate and compare the new competitors still exist.

Collectivism

Rural schools and businesses traditionally have operated in isolation and developed few avenues for learning and cooperation—especially outside of their communities. But innovation is increasingly acknowledged to be a collective, not individual process. As various experts have demonstrated, "nobody is as smart as everybody" [16].

Globalization

A college's customers are increasingly global, forcing it to not only think but also act globally. The CEO of Yahoo claims that "there is probably no business today that you can start that can afford not to be global" [21]. A recent survey found "some 32,000 new business alliances had been formed in the past three years, three-quarters across borders" [8].

Rising academic goals

Just as status and image pushes shifts towards white-collar careers, image and status (and research on impacts of education on income) is enticing colleges toward baccalaureate level degrees—albeit more applied than those offered in universities [c]. Community colleges are having an increasingly difficult time attracting young people into associate of science degree programs. Even in computer fields, despite the high demand and high salaries, enrollments in community colleges have not risen in three years [12].

New occupational mix

A fundamental assumption in the expansion of college resources in the 1970s and 1980s was that manufacturing is the backbone of the rural economy and the source of the best paying jobs. But we can no longer ignore the rise of the high-tech, value-added service sector, especially in information technologies [2]. Research shows that office occupations (even within manufacturing) are growing much faster than production jobs and now are paying higher wages [5].

Responses and Policies

The trends identified above have implications for the missions and forms of community colleges in this new millennium. Following are seven anticipated changes and policies that will reshape and reposition rural colleges to improve opportunities for people in the rural South. All of the projected responses assume two crosscutting requirements. First, given the increasing share of the learning and research on the Internet, rural colleges will have a sufficient technological foundation—access to enough computers to meet student and faculty needs and telecommunications services with the band width for complex web based education, training, and collaboration. Second, colleges will continue, and even step up, efforts to reach and serve previously under-served populations.

Creating paths to higher education

To maintain enrollment and meet rising educational expectations for credits and degrees, the community colleges may have to better articulate its technical AAS with four-year programs and perhaps even offer a three-year applied engineering degree, as many of Europe's polytechnics do. More workers now want credits that allow them to accumulate noncontinuous education towards a degree because it expands their employment options. More transparent paths to further education also improve the image and raise the stature of technical associate degrees.

- *Policies: Accept transfer of applied science and technology courses to four-year colleges and avoid screening out students lacking opportunity to qualify because of race or poverty.*

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> "Several trends have implications for the missions and forms of community colleges in the next millennium."

Pursuing lifelong learning

After a quarter century of talk about lifelong learning, this goal is becoming a reality, driven mainly by IT sectors that require perpetual skill upgrading, and by aging baby boomers who want to remain active learners and workers. Most core IT workers do not have IT degrees, acquiring and upgrading their skills only after graduation. A large percentage of students enrolled in technical programs in community colleges—about 1 in 4—already have bachelor's degrees. Community colleges, because of their flexibility, will become the preferred institutions for returning adults.

- *Policies: Provide flexible scheduling and delivery of education, including accelerated courses over shorter time periods, portability of records, and transferability of educational achievements and competencies among institutions and states.*

Building learning communities

Information technologies are re-configuring the ways that faculty interact with their students and peers. IT affects teaching loads, schedules, curricula design, and educational objectives [9]. It changes curricula from what teachers can teach to what students should know—from providing instruction to producing learning. Economic development theorists increasingly attribute growth to quality of learning environments, and community colleges are best positioned to help rural areas become learning regions.

- *Policies: Use new ways to assess learning outcomes, particularly when linked to web-based education, expand funding for educational research on teaching methods, and provide in-service training for faculty.*

Shifting from competencies to problem solving skills

Employers want people able to think critically, solve complex problems, and communicate. There is perception that community colleges are good at teaching technical skills but not thinking and communicating skills. "A systems approach is necessary for problem-solving: if students don't know how a system works, they cannot identify what might cause a failure" [10]. In the emerging workplace, "economies of depth and cooperation" are as important as economies of scale and scope. To produce workers who understand systems and enterprises, colleges will move more toward a "systems" approach and conceptual understanding [11].

- *Policies: Invest in research and development, undertake implementation and assessments of simulation, contextual, and constructivist teaching methods.*

Forging alliances and collaborating

Colleges, like businesses, are beginning to accept their place in larger local economic systems and the value of learning from, and cooperating with, peers, employers, suppliers, and customers [7]. For a variety of reasons, in every corner of the U.S. and increasingly outside the U.S., colleges are entering into alliances—not just with employers but also with other institutions, vendors, associations, and community organizations. A 1995 study of community colleges found that "the value of learning

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from others through the existing consortia was demonstrated repeatedly and emphatically" [18] This is particularly important to rural college faculty, historically isolated from their peers. Alliances such as Trans-Atlantic Technology and Training Alliance and the Rural Community College Initiative are acting as global learning communities for rural colleges.

- *Policies: Support national and international travel, authorize release time for faculty, and provide multi-institutional structures for interaction, joint ventures, and dissemination of learning.*

Going global

U.S. colleges no longer can assume that work opportunities, markets, best practices, and new ideas are found only within the U.S. borders. To be well prepared, students will have to understand cultures, economic systems, and business environments in other parts of the world. Faculty and administrators will search globally for solutions to problems and innovations.

- *Policies: Support student and faculty exchange, international conferences and meetings, and cross-border joint ventures.*

Targeting and picking niches

Competition from private and Internet-based providers will force community colleges to develop niches and special expertise. While they cannot match the scope of the competition, they can teach in a context that is relevant to local economies and meet the needs of students requiring special attention. Since businesses with similar interests tend to cluster, colleges can take advantage of proximity to key industries, react more quickly to their needs, and add more value to regional economies. They also can partner with some competitors and absorb programs of others, as many do with Cisco, Microsoft, or Oracle certification programs. The more colleges lean toward economic development missions and the stronger the global and corporate competition, the more likely they are to concentrate their resources and develop links to dominant industries.

- *Policies: Provide more start-up funds to colleges for centers based on special expertise and contributions to local economy. Currently, such resources are available mainly from the National Science Foundation.*

> **"Economic development theorists increasingly attribute growth to quality of learning environments, and community colleges are best positioned to help rural areas become learning regions."**

Conclusion

Community colleges have proven extremely adaptable in the past and are likely to lead the shift to a knowledge-based economy because of their regional focus, flexibility, links to employers, and breadth of missions. The biggest barriers will be financial. Despite their accomplishments, community colleges have been undervalued and under-appreciated by many Southerners—particularly state legislators. With no federal legislation to legitimate them and because they are sandwiched between the more extensively championed and visible public schools and universities, they have had to fight for recognition and budgets. The funds they do secure are generally quite inflexible and tightly tied to full-time equivalent enrollments, despite the fact that the vast majority of students

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are working and attending part-time, and despite their economic development missions and impact on their regions' economies and prosperity. Flexible and innovative institutions will need generous and less restrictive support and IT resources to help Southern rural economies have a place at the global table.

Endnotes

[a] In 1998, 64 percent of students worked part time and 36 percent worked full time [1].

[b] In 1998, the average age of students was 29[1].

[c] Projections indicate that only 4.1 percent of occupational demand between 1996 and 2005 requires an associate degree [2].

Stuart A. Rosenfeld is president of Regional Technology Strategies, Inc., a private nonprofit organization that searches out and develops new and innovative economic development ideas. For additional information about this topic, contact him at 205 Lloyd Street, Carboro, N.C. 27510, 919-933-6699, 919-933-6688 (fax) or rosenfeld@rtsinc.org.

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http://www.ext.msstate.edu/srdc

For more information, contact:
Lionel J. Beaulieu, Director
(ljb@srdc.msstate.edu) or
Denise Cosper, Editor
(dcosper@srdc.msstate.edu).

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